Thinking about College in a Coastal, Rural Community

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The community of Deer Isle-Stonington, formed of two separate towns which together make up a bridged island off the coast of Maine, is a community isolated in geography but vibrant, alive, and connected in culture. It is a community economically built on lobstering, the arts, and summer tourism. While there are only 2,400 year-round residents, the population swells in the summertime; over 51% of property taxes in Stonington are paid by non-residents. Summer residents and tourists support numerous restaurants and art galleries and also patronize the vibrant arts community anchored by the Opera House Arts performing arts center and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, both of which are nationally renowned and draw artists, performers, and instructors from around the country and world. Stonington is consistently Maine’s top-producing lobster port, bringing in between six and eight million pounds of lobster that contribute two hundred to three hundred million dollars to the Island’s economy annually. The youth of Deer Isle-Stonington, then, may find themselves at an interesting juncture, with some making thousands of dollars as sternmen on a lobster boat in one summer, and others training with or watching performers and instructors from New York, Chicago, and around the world, yet while there is a faint underlying tension between fishing and the arts, the community consistently comes together to support one another and its students. In light of this community, then, how do the rural high school students of Deer Isle-Stonington think about their futures, and what in the community influences their thinking? This question guided my summer research.

My main goal of the summer was to conduct as many semi-structured interviews as possible with students in Deer Isle-Stonington High School’s graduating classes of 2016 and 2017. I selected this age range because, as juniors and seniors in the fall of 2015, they would likely have begun to think about their futures but would remain in high school for the duration of my research. My first contact with the target participants was during a meeting with all students in the classes of 2016 and 2017, arranged by the school principal. At this meeting, I explained my research and goals and distributed informational fliers, letters, and consent forms to those who were interested. From there, I began to schedule interviews with students via email and text messaging. I continued to gain new contacts throughout the summer as I spent time in the school and community – by approaching students at the school, meeting with community organizations that work with students, and receiving recommendations from teachers and administrators. In total, I was able to conduct and fully transcribe eight interviews with durations between 45 and 90 minutes. Based on established contacts that I have with students, teachers, administrators, and community organizations, I am confident that I will be able to conduct at least four more by the end of September to reach my goal of twelve interview participants.

In addition conducting semi-structured interviews and observations while I was in Deer Isle-Stonington, I chose specific community events as “snapshot observations” of the school and community’s interactions. These were targeted, in depth observations that allowed me to fill in pieces of the school-community narrative that may have been missing or incomplete from the interviews and opportune observations that I otherwise conducted. For these snapshot observations, I selected an end-of-school awards assembly attended by nearly all high school teachers and students in grades nine through eleven and a district budget meeting facilitated by the school board and attended by over 170 community members, at which the district education budget was hotly debated and eventually voted on. I will conduct another snapshot observation in late September at a school-sponsored “Community Discussion on the Future of DIS Schools.” These snapshot observations help me to understand the community and teachers’ perspectives on the education of the community’s students – and, in one case, what the actual monetary value of that education should be. These snapshot observations put interview responses in a larger context and help me to understand how school and community thoughts and actions influence students.

In the time that I was not conducting interviews, community observations, and community research (done by searching news archives, exploring websites, and reading about Deer Isle-Stonington’s history), I began to read and explore the scholarly literature written about rural education and the sociological theory around education and opportunity in general. For a broad foundation of understanding the influences of socioeconomic status, I read Annette Lareau’s Unequal Childhoods. I explored place-based education and its values through Learning to Leave and other writings by Michael Corbett. Mara Ticken’s Why Rural Schools Matter and Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas’s Hollowing Out the Middle, two place-specific, ethnographic works about rural schools, helped me to understand how to frame and analyze my research. As the year goes on, I will continue to read related academic literature in order to ground my interviews and findings in sociological theory. Together, my interviews, community and snapshot observations, and literature review will provide the groundwork for an Honors project in Sociology with Professor Ingrid Nelson.

Faculty Mentors: Ingrid Nelson, Sociology and Charles Dorn, Education

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